

Hour Children*

Contact Information:

Executive Director: Sr. Tesa Fitzgerald

Address: 36-11A 12th St., Long Island City, NY 11106

Phone: 718-433-4724

Fax: 718-433-4728

E-mail: hour.children@worldnet.att.net

Overview of the Program

Hour Children is a private, non-sectarian, non-profit organization that consists of several residential and non-residential programs serving children and families of female offenders, as well as the offenders themselves. Hour Children is notable both for its origins in children's services and for its continuity of services for mothers, beginning when they are incarcerated at one of several institutions and providing housing and services to them along with their children upon release to the community. "Inside" services include parenting classes, domestic violence groups, employment preparation, individual counseling, advocacy on parent/child issues, and facilitation of visits with their children. My Mother's House, the first of Hour Children's programs, was founded in 1986 initially as a component of Providence House, a New York residence for homeless women and women released from prison. As the different needs of these populations became clearer, Hour Children was formed in 1992 to serve offenders and their families specifically. A major program component of My Mother's House was weekly visits to the incarcerated parent. Residential programs now include:

- ◇ My Mother's House I (a residence for children whose mothers are currently incarcerated);
- ◇ Hour Children House II (transitional housing and services for formerly incarcerated women who are reuniting with their children);
- ◇ Hour Children House III (work-release site for women and their babies who were part of Taconic's or Bedford Hills's Prison Nursery Programs);
- ◇ My Mother's House II (for infants and toddlers whose mothers are incarcerated and families who are reuniting); and
- ◇ Hour Apartment House I (permanent housing for families who have successfully completed Hour Children's transitional programs).

with incarcerated mothers); Hour Children Thrift Store and Furniture Outlet and Food Pantry (trained ex-offenders administer these programs); and Counseling-on-Wheels (bringing therapeutic counseling services to formerly incarcerated women and children in the residences and throughout the five boroughs of New York).

As a program, Hour Children focused first on the children, providing a stable home environment for children with a commitment to facilitating regular contact between the child and his or her incarcerated mother. The program expanded to address the needs of the adult offender both within and outside the institutional walls, particularly as those needs pertained to her parenting role. Despite serving a common population, this developmental path has led to a program that differs from most corrections-based mother-child programs, with a stronger emphasis on stability and continuity for the children, less overt emphasis on accountability, monitoring, and public safety, and less formal relationships with governmental agencies.

Program Components

The programs at Hour Children are designed to be fairly fluid, with residential placements based more on age of children and level of family support needed, rather than on criminal justice status. The exception is Hour Children House III (HCH III) which is a work-release site, now in its sixth year. HCH III can house up to ten women and their babies. The House is notespecially well-suited to older children, but older children frequently visit and are treated like members of the household.

In HCH III, as in all Hour Children programs, contact with the women is initiated while the women are incarcerated at Taconic Correctional Facility and Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, medium and maximum security prisons, respectively, in the northern suburbs of New York City. Women and their babies are released to Hour Children when CASAT (the state-mandated nine-month drug program) is completed. No additional screening is done for HCH III because the nursery programs screen women for inclusion. Most women have been sentenced for drug offenses, and the screening process eliminates violent offenders, including perpetrators of child abuse, and women convicted of arson.

HCH III provides child care while women are engaged in their work requirements.

Sister Tesa, the Executive Director who also makes her home at H CH III, maintains regular contact with parole officers. Monitoring of women to ensure compliance with work release requirements is conducted primarily through daily contact in the household.

Health care coverage for women on work-release is provided through the Department of Corrections. When parole begins, most find access to health care through their jobs or through Medicaid. Women remain at H CH III an average of six months to a year. Because Hour Children does not contract with the Department of Corrections, it can continue to provide services beyond the work-release period. When residents are considered stable and prepared, they can move to another Hour Children facility or out on their own. Referrals to the program come mostly through the network of volunteer advocates working in the prison, nursery staff, as well as from chaplains and other prison-based staff.

Facilities

Four of the five residential facilities were former parish convents which Hour Children rents and/or maintains. (Technically, they are still convents insofar as nuns still live in them.) H CH III is a three-story building, with high-ceilinged, dark paneled central hallways and compact, basic, but well-lit bedrooms off the central corridors. Each bedroom has a single bed, a crib, and a sink, and staff dress up the rooms for new comers with curtains and colorful linens. There is one bathroom on each hall, with multiple sinks, showers and toilet stalls. There is a communal kitchen, used by residents, live-in volunteers, and the three members of the Sisters of St. Joseph for whom H CH III is home. There are two large, well-equipped playrooms on the first and second floors, a small chapel for meditation and/or worship, another small room for visitors, as well as a first-floor office. The office and the front door have locks, but there is otherwise no security or surveillance in H CH III. Central agency offices are located in a small building behind Hour Children House II and across the street from My Mother's House I, about fifteen minutes by car from H CH III. My Mother's House II is about 5 minutes from the central office.

Funding, Resources, and Community Support

The \$700,000 budget of Hour Children is funded entirely by foundations and private

Hour Children has a board of directors that conducts fundraising and other support activities. All board members are required to have some familiarity with prisons through visiting or volunteering before joining the board. Community members provide donations to the thrift shop and food pantry. The programs also rely on community connections to facilitate job placement, and identify sponsors for gifted or special-needs children to attend private schools. Hour Children has experienced no community opposition to their programs. The program is very much a "hands-on" landlord for their residences, and staff are highly visible to members of the immediate community.

Program Goals and Evaluation

The mission statement of Hour Children states: Hour Children is committed to the compassionate and loving care of children of incarcerated women. Our outreach includes support and empowerment for mothers upon their reunification with their families. All persons are encouraged to live and interact with dignity and respect.

The goals of the program are to provide a stable home environment for children and their mothers. The bottom line, according to the director, is helping mothers stay out of prison and rebuild their lives. Formal evaluation has not been conducted, though the director cites the following as indications of success: no one on work release has relapsed; only three women in six years have been remanded to prison on the work-release program because of employment issues; the program has never had to do a search for drugs in any of the residences (indicators of relapse are monitored by staff and other residents and disclosures are facilitated). Of 75 My Mother's House "graduates" (children who were cared for there), the director reports that most remain in touch with the program and return for an annual holiday party, and none have "turned to crime."

On a more individual note, Sister Tesa encourages residents to become less self-centered and more interested in "giving back" and helping others in the residential setting. Experientially, she notices that when this happens, it is a strong indication that the program participant will be successful.

New York shelter system rather than remain with them, because the shelter system provides the only way to access Section 8 housing in New York. Finally, because their approach to children and families is comprehensive, another challenge is resisting trying to meet all the needs they see.

Lessons learned

Sister Tesa had the following advice to developing programs:

- ◇ Don't build on grants or other sources that will only be available for the short term.
- ◇ Start small and personal -- women in these situations don't need institutions.
- ◇ Prioritize needs. You won't be able to meet them all. Empower others to get involved and meet the needs that you can't.
- ◇ Always remember the needs of children.
- ◇ Respect that women need adult time and they may need to be taught how to relax and how to take care of themselves in healthy ways.
- ◇ Keep expectations realistic and build in room for failure.
- ◇ Compassion is key!

